

# Art Transforms Education

## A Boston Pilot School Puts Student Learning Center Stage

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**I**s the MFA really the new MBA? Bestselling author Daniel Pink and other thinkers are challenging us with that question these days. According to Pink, the United States and other developed countries are quickly moving beyond an Information Age that required essentially linear, logical and analytical skills which could be measured, at least in theory, by SAT and MCAS scores alone. As outsourcing becomes ubiquitous, as computers can do routine, sequential tasks far faster and more accurately than the best-educated human being can, and as individuals in an affluent society look for beauty and meaning in their lives, Pink argues that we have moved to a Conceptual Age in which "mastery of abilities that we have often undervalued and overlooked marks the fault line between who gets ahead and who falls behind." The abilities that matter most for this new economy are artistry, empathy, passion, seeing the big picture and the transcendent—right-brain skills that we have always associated with learning in the arts.

Slowly, business and civic leaders are realizing that to compete successfully with China, India and other emerging nations in an instant worldwide economy, we must develop creative, innovative thinkers—people who can harness and transform science and technology and envision solutions to seemingly intractable social and civic problems. "To flourish in this new environment," argues Pink, "we will need to supplant well-developed high-tech abilities with aptitudes that involve the ability to create artistic and emotional beauty, to detect patterns and opportunities, to craft a satisfying narrative and to come up with inventions the world didn't know it was missing."

These, and the capacity to empathize, are fundamental human traits. But in our rush to do things faster and cheaper than the rest of the world, we have let this right-brain, artistic side of our lives atrophy. It is time, Pink

argues, in our schools and colleges and in our businesses, to re-emphasize the right-brain thinking we all possess.

### Disjuncture

At the very time that innovative thinkers such as Pink and others are calling for a new emphasis on creativity, much national and state-level debate centers on very limited definitions of student success and emphasizes curricular content that can be easily assessed by quantifiable tools. The quantifiable measures required by many state education laws and the federal No Child Left Behind Act are actually driving out the kind of learning and pedagogy that help develop the very right-brain thinking that these futuristic thinkers are calling for.

Does a disjuncture always have to exist between the politically driven agenda of the bureaucracies that control our schools and a meaningful pedagogy that could empower a diverse generation of young people to thrive in the new worldwide economy?

A report issued by the American Association of American Colleges and Universities last year suggests otherwise. *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College* calls for sweeping changes in higher education. As college-level education becomes almost universal, colleges and universities must address for the first time the experiences of a student body that is vastly diverse in aspirations, prior learning experiences, economic and ethnic backgrounds and learning styles.

*Greater Expectations* calls for a major pedagogical shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered education; to integrated and collaborative, rather than solitary, isolated learning; and to a coherent, sequential curriculum that is developed and refined over time by a group of colleagues responding to the real learning experiences of their students. The report calls for a movement away from time-based, piecemeal measures of learning and toward portfolio, outcomes-based assessment. It calls for empowering students to become engaged and responsible for managing their own learning process. It insists that the teacher become primarily the mentor or coach and the student the performer, writer, creator and thinker.

Many of the characteristics identified in *Greater Expectations* as critical for the future success of undergraduate education emphasize the “right-brain thinking” that Pink and others call for. Interestingly, the pedagogical methodology outlined in the report is at the heart of the Critique method used widely in studio courses in the visual arts, music, theater and creative writing. The Critique essentially puts the student at the center of the learning process. It expects the student to be a passionate and committed creator, and requires the student to produce a coherent and increasingly sophisticated body of work, subject to rigorous analysis and assessment by faculty-mentors, student-peers, and often outside experts.

### Studio work

Creativity or imagination is central to the arts, and fostering this capacity in students through the Critique is at least as important as developing mastery of skill or technique. The Critique emphasizes the process as much as product and progressive assessment as much as summative measures. The Critique also seeks to develop creative problem-solving skills. The time needed to achieve these ends varies widely from student to student. So completing a uniform number of class minutes or semester weeks becomes far less the measure of assessment than the quality of a final portfolio of creative work. During the learning process, the student produces a progressively complex body of work for all to see. Students also learn to become articulate about their work. They must be able to defend their thought processes, explain the materials used, and the artists and traditions that have influenced it, both orally and in writing. Faculty engaged in the Critique method serve less as teachers in the traditional sense than as mentors, coaches or expert observers. Often, students and faculty from other courses participate in the Critique, so that student work becomes transparent.

Because faculty see the work of their students develop, and assess it constantly over the course of several years, the Critique method enables whole departments to plan coherent and integrated curricular sequences within a discipline or across disciplines. The result is often a vibrant and meaningful curriculum based upon observing what learners really require from them as mentors to grow creatively, intellectually and professionally.

*Greater Expectations* calls for profound shifts in educational approach: from teacher to learner, from lecturing to mentoring, from empowering the teacher to empowering the learner, from rote learning to critical thinking. And it insists that individual students demonstrate accountability for their own learning—for all students in all classes, not only in studio classes. The report calls for re-emphasizing the right brain in learning. The important question, then, is whether essential characteristics of the Critique—which does

these things so well—can be fruitfully transferred and adapted to liberal arts as well as professional education in our schools and colleges. A brief look at the experimental curriculum at the only arts-centered pilot school within the Boston Public Schools provides some insight into this question.

### Piloting right-brain thinking

The Boston Arts Academy (BAA) was founded seven years ago under the sponsorship of the ProArts Colleges of Boston, a consortium of Massachusetts College of Art, Berklee College of Music, Emerson College, the Boston Architectural Center, the Boston Conservatory and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Faculty and staff from these colleges and Boston-area universities have served as academy curriculum advisors, mentors and board members. The colleges have also provided scholarships, summer programs, facilities and advanced courses for students of the school, as well as student teachers and interns in various disciplines.

The BAA's student body reflects that of Boston's public schools as a whole, except that its students are chosen on the basis of auditions. From its beginning, the academy has been committed to the academic success of its students and to their growing abilities in visual arts, music, dance and theater. The school has established a remarkable record of acceptance to college of more than 95 percent of its students. Many of its graduates attend ProArts Colleges and other performing or visual arts schools, but many go on to non-specialized liberal arts colleges, community colleges and universities as well.

The BAA is the only arts school in the national Coalition of Essential Schools founded by Ted Sizer and colleagues at Brown University. The academy is committed to empowering students to be active learners. The BAA is a very lively place, filled with the sounds of students creating, working and rehearsing throughout the day, into the evening and on weekends. However, walking around the school, one also can note how the high level of student engagement in arts courses carries over to humanities and math, writing and science.

All teachers—whether in studio courses or other academic disciplines—have embraced a strong commitment to a coherent, integrated, arts-centered curriculum. Right-brain thinking—problem-solving, synthesis, artistic and creative expression and passion—are given equal importance to left-brain skills such as analysis, logic and computational literacy.

### Authentic assessment

The centrality of the arts at the BAA allows the school's faculty to think deeply about curriculum and assessment. In good arts education, culturally relevant pedagogy is the norm, because much in the arts can revolve around cultures and experiences that are not one's own. The teachers call this *authentic assessment*. In the arts, since process is often as important as product, teachers

are more comfortable with assessment that is not a single-mode, right- or wrong-answer test. In addition, the arts often include a wide range of learners, so differentiated instruction is the norm not the exception. Arts teachers rarely talk about their inability to teach a theatre or visual arts class with students at different levels. At the BAA, the pedagogical approach for learning in the arts is used across the entire curriculum.

BAA students continually present their work to peers, to their teachers, to other teachers, to parents and to a range of community members. Students prepare portfolios in math, science, world languages and the humanities. In late spring, students demonstrate their accomplishments through portfolios, performances and exhibitions. Students usually have prepared deeply for this particular event and they know their areas of study well.

In addition, math and science fairs and an annual Senior Humanities Exhibition bring outside academic experts and community leaders, parents, alums and others to the school as reviewers of student learning. The teachers use the term *authentic assessment* because they believe this form of evaluation promotes further understanding and learning for both teachers and students. The inclusion of *outsiders* or a committee to judge the assessment also highlights the importance of the student's work. It matters if a student is presenting to people other than peers and teachers.

Unlike pencil-and-paper standardized tests that usually have only one right answer, authentic assessments focus on a student's process of learning and ability to describe, define and reflect on where one is in the learning process as well as his or her ability to master a given set of concepts.

Furthermore, teachers have the opportunity to gain insight into their own pedagogy as they witness their students describing the learning process and their mastery over some aspect of the content that was taught. The use of authentic assessment is much more risky for teachers since it quickly can expose a student's lack of understanding and thus make a teacher feel vulnerable about his own ability to convey knowledge and information. A student defending or presenting her math portfolio or Spanish oral exam to other audience members, who may sit on a committee to judge the work, make the classroom teacher much more vulnerable to criticism about what was taught and how. The true exhibition is the performance itself and this is when the public judges the piece.

As with all art forms, this public performance creates an authentic environment for reflecting on what makes good work. And this is perhaps the most rigorous form of assessment for students. Something dramatically different happens when students present their artwork.

There is a passion and a level of ownership of technique that may not be as prevalent in academic portfolio presentations, perhaps attributable to the power of students suddenly seeing themselves as learners and creators able to solve problems and bring unique contributions or understanding to a set of constraints or criteria. The connection to artists past and present who matter to a student has an enormous influence. Students see themselves within the landscape of other artists who are examining myriad realities and they are excited to be part of that. Students appreciate being able to express themselves, to be themselves and to be respected and accepted by others—peers and adults alike.

### Empathetic thinking

The experience to date at the Boston Arts Academy suggests that learning and pedagogy in the arts can inform, even transform, liberal learning for a diverse population of students and in the ways the *Greater Expectations* report calls for. And the experience can foster the kind of right-brain, innovative and empathetic thinking and passion that Daniel Pink's Conceptual Age demands. The arts give voice to the soul and to our ability to express and communicate human emotion in a way that no other discipline has approached.

We think that passion and commitment can transfer to academic classes. The dullness of the traditional school day leaves so many adolescents numb, alienated and disconnected. When school can put the relationships found in the study of technical or expressive arts at the center of study, learning becomes a meaningful and rich experience. When students have to authentically demonstrate their mastery of an idea, concept or skill in a manner that is both rigorous and worthy of professional critique, schoolwork becomes real work. It matters.

Pink's Conceptual Age may not require an arts curriculum as intensive as the BAA's for all students. But the principles at the core of comprehensive arts education and the pedagogy of the Critique encourage schools to put relationships between students and caring, expert teacher-mentors in the center. It must matter to adults in a school that students use their minds well. And it must matter that students' imaginations and creativity count. By embracing arts education, its use of the Critique, and its open approaches to assessment, as an educational birthright for all young people and adolescents, we might better understand how to reinvigorate our academic classrooms, reform our schools and prepare a new generation of thoughtful and creative college students.

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